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Henry Steele Commager puts US character under microscope

By Nancy Frazier
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AMHERST – "We are going to question the meaning of equality," said Prof. Henry Steele Commager tilting backward in his chair which, like others surrounding the table, had its Amherst College emblem worn nearly illegible by the rub of so many backs. "Not in all areas, for that would be too much to cover," he continued, beginning to rock back and forth.

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During the 50 years he has been teaching and writing, Commager has published more books and articles than he can keep track of. Thousands of people learned American history from volumes he coauthored with Allan Nevins and from "The Growth of the American Republic," a standard college text he wrote with Samuel Eliot Morison in 1931. In fact, many students remember assigned readings in Commager and Nevins or Morison and Commager to the extent that the authors' names replaced the title of the text.

The decades accumulated beneath his high brow and untamed white mane have not dampened his enthusiasm for knowing all of the history and every quirk in the character of this country – the United States of America is a microchip inside Commager's head – nor have they tarnished his commitment to reminding us constantly of our moral obligations. He is, as he said of Theodore Parker in a biography written in 1947, "a moral agitator." And, as he also wrote of Parker, it can be said of him, "His scholarship [is] prodigious; it [is] even esoteric; but it [is] never private."

During the mid-1950s he went to Washington as an academic leader protesting the activities of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, he has gone there to "expostulate," as he puts it, about the paranoia of America's fear of the Soviet Union, he spoke out against US involvement in Vietnam. He has been called upon to serve on presidential commissions and frequently before legislative committees.

Commager has received many awards and honors, including the Gold Medal for History from the National Academy of Arts and Letters. He has honorary degrees from more than 44 colleges and universities here and abroad, and has lectured all over the world, including Israel, Latin America, Japan, and most of the countries in Western Europe.

On a recent fall week, sitting in a parlor of his home in Amherst which, large as it is, is still bursting at the seams with books, the question was raised: How did he arrive at his interests and persuasions?

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On advertising and corruption

In his seminars, his lectures and his conversation, Commager winds anecdotally through centuries, but his sense of morality and conscience becomes sharpest when he speaks of the failures during our own era. He sees television and newspapers as the strongest influences in contemporary life and comes down hard on advertising therein. "Because advertising is misleading," he said. "It is fundamentally dishonest. Anyone in advertising will do or say what they're paid to say, whether it is true or not. It is deeply corrupting. It is the most corrupting thing in American life."

Can such corruption be expunged?

"The elementary way to avoid corruption is a tax system that doesn't make it profitable to be corrupt. Why bother to make $100,000 if $90,000 of that is going to be taken away?" The power of taxation, he told his Tocqueville class, is the most revolutionary power in any country.

Perhaps Commager's outspoken disapproval not just of television, but of every example of American behavior that he sees as repressive or unconstitutional – from discrimination based upon race, to Red baiting, to presidential infringement on Congress' power, to Richard Nixon, the CIA, Reaganomics, nuclear arms – is what once prompted Dick Cavett to ask him (on what Cavett said was a dare), why he didn't understand the 20th century. For a moment Henry Commager was stunned, but he shot back:

"I have embraced the 20th century with different degrees of affection for all of my life."

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